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ABSTRACT

In examining the role and responsibilities of the student teacher supervisor, the following demands, or constraints inherent in the job are discussed: (1) the content, skills, and dispositions students are expected to acquire and strengthen, and the aims and objectives the supervisor wishes to set; (2) the level of mastery and competence the supervisor expects students to attain; (3) the affective quality of supervision, student relationships the supervisor intends to establish and maintain, and the feelings within the students the supervisor intends to engender; (4) assessment, grading, marking or other types of evaluation of students' performance in teacher practice and the amount and type of feedback given to students with respect to their own performance; (5) the characteristics of the teaching, classroom and school situation in which students' teaching practice occurs; and (6) the allocation of time for teaching practice and the whole course. It is pointed out that these demands often conflict with each other and not all of them can be satisfied at the same time. Suggestions are made for further research on student teacher supervisors. (JD)

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CONFLICTING DEMANDS IN THE ROLE OF SUPERVISOR OF TEACHING PRACTICE

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CONFLICTING DEMANDS IN THE ROLE OF SUPERVISOR OF TEACHING PRACTICE

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Introduction

Most educators agree that teaching practice constitutes the capstone of teacher preparation experiences (Housego and Boldt, 1985). In the literature on teacher education emanating from those countries fortunate enough to be able to provide teacher training - and a significant proportion of countries provide virtually none at all - there is also consensus that teacher education in general, and teaching practice in particular, are seriously deficient in many ways. It seems especially discouraging to note that criticism of teacher education flows readily not only from outsiders, but also from within the ranks of teacher educators themselves. Professor Stones himself, (1984) for example, presents an disheartening picture of the state of the art of supervision of teaching practice.

No doubt there are many ways to explain the alleged ineffectiveness of teacher education and teaching practice.

Most likely each of us has a preferred way of accounting for it. What I propose to do on this occasion is to present a framework for looking at the role of the supervisor that seems reasonably applicable across countries, and to take up some specific issues implied by the framework proposed .

As a point of departure, I have chosen to adapt the provocative ideas of Abrahamson and Westbury (1974) who suggest that there are four principal constraints faced by all teachers at every level of education. The categories of constraints they selected to include share a common characteristic - namely, that as efforts are directed toward one of the constraints, almost surely, the others are affected adversely. Their list includes the following:

Coverage: the teacher's obligation to take pupils through a prescribed list of topics or complete a syllabus, textbook or curriculum.

Mastery: the teacher's obligation to ensure that pupils achieve adequate mastery of the subject or skills that are to be covered.

Affect: the teacher's obligation to make pupils feel accepted and to make the class interesting or at least moderately appealing, and to make the classroom climate somewhat pleasant.

Discipline: the teacher's obligation to enforce school rules and requirements, support community behavioural norms and values and to obtain pupils' attention, compliance and cooperation in the instruction, learning tasks and assignments.

Abrahamson and Westbury (1974) point out that a teacher's emphasis on any one of these categories of constraints is obtained at the expense of one or more of the others, and that furthermore, the ubiquitous occurence of formal didactic instruction, the traditional "chalk and talk" approach to education readily observed around the world, probably represents the optimisation of all four constraints. To the extent that a country, region or educational authority's curriculum is "examination driven" the formal whole-group instruction approach may represent the 'least worst' solution to the management of all four constraints.

Adopting this very useful analysis, I wish to propose that the role of the supervisor of teaching practice is similarly circumscribed, albeit by somewhat different categories of constraints. I have chosen, however, to label them demands rather than constraints in order to convey the sense that they are aspects of the role that seem to "push" and "pull" the role-taker in different, if not opposite directions. The order or priority of the principal demands herein nominated are difficult to establish. Perhaps they vary with characteristics of the students, the staff, the point in time at which the teaching practice experience is offered, or in other as yet unspecified ways. Nor are they, strictly speaking, at parallel or equivalent conceptual levels. They

are offered tentatively for heuristic purposes in the hope that they will throw into relief some of the inevitable, if not irremediable limitatiors of the supervisor's role and consequent effectiveness.

Demands on the Role of Teaching Practice Supervisors

The following categories of principal demands in the role of supervisors nominated are:

1. Coverage: the content, skills and dispositions students are expected to acquire and strengthen. The latter would be determined by the aims and objectives set by the supervisor and/or the course.

2. Mastery: the level of mastery and competence the supervisor expects students to attain.

3. Affect: the affective quality of supervisor-student relationships the supervisor intends to establish and maintain, and the feelings within students the supervisor intends to engender.

4. Evaluation: assessment, grading, marking or other types of evaluation of students' performance on teaching practice and the amount and type of feedback given to students with respect to their own performance.

5. Placement: characteristics of the teaching, classroom and school situation in which students' teaching practice occurs.

6. Time: the allocation of time for teaching practice; the temporal sequence, concurrence or simultaneity in which particular experiences are provided in teaching practice and the whole course.

Theoretically, at least, it could be argued that each of the six demands conflicts with all five of the others. However, for present purposes I wish to address those that seem to be the most obvious and pressing conflicts.

Coverage and mastery

It is relatively easy to see that the two demands for coverage and mastery pull or push teachers as well as supervisors in virtually opposite directions. For example, the greater the number of teaching or pedagogical skills the supervisor wants students to cover, i. e., to practice, the less likely they are to gain complete mastery over any one of them. If, on the other hand, priority is given to mastery, it is likely that the range or sheer number of skills practiced will be smaller.

These two demands are in conflict mainly because, like everything else, they occur in time. The supervisor is obliged to make choices concerning how to allocate a finite amount of time to each of them. Clearly some pedagogical skills take longer to master than others, and no doubt those that contribute most to effectiveness in teaching take the longest, requiring the most practice! Supervisors are thus compelled to specify which skills are most essential to effectiveness in teaching, and to insist on their mastery, invariably leaving themselves open to self and other

criticism that students are insufficiently prepared to cope with the 'real world' of the school.

A very common criticism of teacher education is (and very likely always has been) that students do not adequately cover or master the subjects they are to teach. In the U. S., at least, numerous high-powered enquiry and study commissions have been proposing that it is best to yield to demands for mastery of the teaching subjects at the expense of covering pedagogy and its 'supply' disciplines. As far as I know, there are no data upon which to argue the case one way or another, and evidence would be very difficult to obtain. In the developed countries there are no appropriate samples of employed teachers without practice teaching available to serve as control or even contrast groups with fully trained teachers. The problems confronting most teachers in developing countries, trained or untrained, are so numerous that such comparisons would most likely be conceptually as well as methodologically inappropriate.

In sum, supervisors inevitably face conflicts concerning the extent to which their efforts should be directed to greater coverage or greater mastery. Whichever decision the supervisor takes, errors, largely of omission, must occur. Thus the role of the supervisor includes constant choices of which of the likely errors are preferable.

Affect and evaluation

Most supervisors suffer strong demands to address various aspects of students' affective states. If they yield to these demands too readily they may be accused of being soft and fuzzy-minded, and occasionally even of not knowing their stuff. If they discount affective demands they may be characterized as remote and insensitive. In some cases these attributions may be valid. After all, supervisors can be expected to vary, as do other individuals, in their capacities to offer encouragement and nurturance. A supervisor's choice among the competing demands may be rationalized by citing the importance of the one chosen, even though the motive may in fact be more a function of his/her personal qualities than hypotheses concerning adult development and learning. Since students also vary with respect to their affective needs and vulnerabilities, the role of supervisor may require a capacity for emotional flexibility that is unrealistic.

Perhaps the most serious conflicts for supervisors arise out of the competing demands to give students support and encouragment versus the demand to make realistic and honest assessments of performance and to feed the assessment results back to students. A supervisor is very frequentlyt compelled to struggle with the choice between providing true but potentially discouraging feedback or strengthening much

needed confidence by witholding it. Each choice carries with it the potential for errors that could have long-range consequences. When the 'truth' is witheld in order to allow the student time to achieve greater mastery, but no progress is later observed, the supervisor may feel it unfair to counsel out a student who has already invested several years in teacher preparation. In many such cases the supervisor faces the choice between the error of discouraging or even failing a student who might have become good at teaching, or of retaining a student who might turn out to be ill suited to it.

To my knowledge there are no data to guide the supervisor in the choice or error in cases of this kind. The choice must be based on the relevant ethics and the teacher education program's 'quality control' or professional gate-keeping obligations. The anguish generated by such conflicts might be somewhat alleviated when the staff involved in the course explicate and concur on what ethical and professional positions it intends to take in such cases, and by making these positions clear to students early in the course.

Coverage and Practice Placements

One of the inescapable tensions faced by all professional training institutions is that they are charged with the responsibility of creating and imparting to students new knowledge and ensuring that they acquire the most recently developed practices. This charge can only be taken seriously if it rests on the explicit assumption that the current standard practices of the profession are in need of improvement. If this is so, current practitioners in the profession must be wary of the staff of professional training institutions! This tension exacerbates the problems of maintaining congenial relationships between college staff (e.g. supervisors) and school personnel.

To the extent that college of education courses succeed at preparing students with new pedagogy, the receiving school staffs are apt to describe new graduates as unprepared for 'the real world of the schools'. If, on the other hand, colleges aim simply to bring students to the level of standard pedagogy practiced in the schools, the need for college courses may be in serious doubt. Learning to teach to the common standard can probably be accomplished economically and fairly efficiently by imitation and apprenticeship without the superstructure of the education establishment. However, the expectation that new graduates

in their first year of teaching can change or even improve current practice is not very realistic. Whether colleges aim to equip students with new and improved pedagogical practices or to prepare them to emulate current practice, they cannot really win! Recent proposals in the U. S. to place students in the schools for longer periods and earlier in their training to learn the very practices colleges of education are criticised for failing to improve is one of the many contradictions teacher educators face. Similarly, proposals to give practising teachers a more central role in teacher training have also been issued, even though the same reports declare that the current quality of teaching puts the nation at risk! It is of only small comfort that such professional school - practitioner tensions, the recriminations and accusations concerning the impracticality and ineffectiveness of training institutions are common to all the professions.

The more specific conflicting demands faced by supervisors become especially problematic when the pedagogy practiced in the placement classroom is at significant variance with the ideals and skills advocated by the supervisor and other staff responsible for the course. It is difficult to know with certainty how frequently such variances occur. But impressions acquired from experience suggest that conflicts in these two categories of demands are common enough to be

faced sooner or later, and more or less, by all supervisors of teaching practice, and that most of the time, the students are in the middle. Clearly, the frequency of such conflicts is reduced when the supply of good placements is sufficient to meet the demand. In most countries, the few good placements available suffer from excessive use.

The supervisor may have to choose between helping the student to master the practices required in the placement classroom, setting aside what was covered and advocated in the course, or encouraging the student to subvert the practices employed by the school in which he/she is practice teaching. Some strong students may be able to accommodate to the conflicting messages issued by college and school staffs and learn much from the experience. But the strong students are not the main source of stress for supervisors.

Some institutions address the problem by providing demonstration of laboratory schools. Some of these may provide opportunties to observe and practice good pedagogy. However, such schools often cater to specialised populations, and frequently include a much wider range of personnel and material resources than graduates are likely to have at hand in their future employment.

Coverage and time

As indicated above, the range and depth of content covered in a course and in teaching practice are constrained by the amount of time available. In addition, teacher educators are confronted with conflicting pressures with respect to timing and sequencing of various components of training courses. Questions concerning timing include: When is the 'right' time or 'best' time to introduce information and skills? and What aspects of learning to teach can or cannot be learned in advance?

Overall the most stubborn problem, common to all anticipatory socialization, of which professional training is one type, is the fact that it consists largely of giving students answers to questions not yet asked, and preparing them for eventualities rather than actualities. This problem has been defined by Katz and Raths (1986) as the "feedforward effect". The general principle underlying the "feedforward effect" is that while experience, once obtained, does not change, the meaning and value assigned to it, i.e. the evaluations of those experiences, may change as time passes and subsequent experiences and understandings accrue.

By way of example from another field, Neel (1978) reported a study of 200 executives who were asked about what changes they would like if they were to go back to undergraduate

school in business, and what classes would enhance their careers. Neel reported:

> Three distinct categories emerged...(1) individuals out of an undergraduate program for only three years indicated they would include more technical or "how-to" courses... (2)...executives with seven to ten years' work experience indicated their careers would have been significantly enhanced if they had had additional courses in human relations, psychology or sociology to equip them for more effective dealings with people within the organization; and (3) individuals with twelve to fifteen years of work experience indicated that they would have liked additional courses in philosophy, religious studies and literature. (Neel, 1978, p. 7).

These data partially support the existence of the "feedforward effect" and suggest that the changes in evaluation of training experiences may be systematically related to developmental factors associated with a teacher's career. It is interesting to note that if, as students, these individuals in the second or third group had been required to study sociology or philosophy, they would very likely have objected to doing so, probably on the grounds that they are not sufficiently practical.

Specifically, Katz and Raths (1986) propose that teacher training can be thought of in terms of three distinct time periods as follows:

Period I: Anticipatory - before enrolment in a training course.

Period II: Participatory - during training

Period III: Retrospective - during teaching career

During Period I the candidate for teacher education has perhaps rather vague notions about the nature of the training experiences about to be undertaken. Of particular interest are candidates' views concerning how practical and how interesting the course is likely to be, and what features of it they expect to be of most help in learning to teach. During Period II, while the student is an active participant in the course, he or she evaluates the interest and usefulness of elements of the course. In Period III, spanning an entire teaching career, the graduate also evaluates the experiences obtained earlier.

We have hypothesized that the evaluations, particularly with respect to usefulness and interest of course elements, change during the early years of the career (perhaps the first ten or fifteen) such that what may have been evaluated

positively with respect to interest or usefulness during Period II may, retrospectively be judged low in either or both of these variables. Similarly, what a student evaluates negatively during Period II may, retrospectively be reassessed positively. Thus a teacher in the third year of employment might say such things as, "I was bored by the work required of me while a student, but now, as I look back, I'm glad I had to do it" or vice versa.

It is likely that teaching practice experiences receive more positive evaluations during both Period II and III than other elements of the course. Teachers very often claim that teaching practice was the only part of their course of lasting value. The extent to which these claims are related to the role the supervisor played in the teaching practice experience is not known. However, if our hypothesis is valid, it may be that some of what supervisors do that makes students feel uncomfortable at the time may be evaluated positively in retrospect, and that supervisors' actions or inactions intended to make students feel comfortable will in retrospect be criticized. Empirical validation of the "feedforward effect" requires longitudinal follow-up studies.

The major implication of the "feedforward" hypothesis is that decisions concerning what is in students' best interests cannot be based entirely upon their reactions to

their experiences while they are undergoing them. The difficult question is: On what basis should those decisions be made?

In the U. S. these questions were addressed by the development of competency-based teacher education programs. The movement has since floundered, in part because the list of desirable competences became too large to manage. Katz and Raths (1985) suggested that the acquisition of competence is an insufficient criterion of effectiveness of teacher education, and that whether or not the teacher possesses the dispositions to apply appropriate competences should be included in the aims of teacher education courses. Thus, whether or not a student has the interactive and pedagogical skills involved in, for example, problem-solving (Stones, 1984) in and of itself is not an adequate criterion of success of the course. Rather, the course, particularly via the role of supervisors, must take responsibility for strengthening the dispositions that give rise to the application of those skills. Addressing the dispostional aspects of candidates' development takes time, since, by definition, dispositions are inferred from "act frequencies" measured over time.

Summary

In sum, I have tried to outline some of the issues arising from the assumption that the role of supervisors - indeed, of all educators, includes conflicting demands that are inherent in the work, and that not all of these demands can be satisfied at the same time. I have suggested also that decisions about which of the competing demands should be addressed carry with them their own potential errors: yielding to one demand inevitably causes errors associated with overlooking others, and supervisors are faced with having to chose which errors they prefer.

Implications for Research

I am not aware of any reports of studies of the pressures and demands supervisors perceive to be inherent in their work. Thus one of the first steps that might be taken in research is to examine the role of supervisors in terms of the role demands and sources of role strain as they perceive them, and describe their attempts to deal with them.

In addition, longitudinal studies of students, following them up into their careers are also urgently needed. However, research in teacher education in general, and longitudinal studies in particular present serious methodological and conceptual problems.

On the technical side, a major one is the nature of the unit of analysis. Theoretically, a singe teacher training course should be the unit of analysis, so that if all the students from a single course are followed up, the study only has an N of 1. This implies that longitudinal studies should be undertaken by consortia of colleges of teacher education in which each college constitutes a reseasrch "subject". However, the coordination and expense of such research is likely to be prohibitive.

Longitudinal studies also present problems of sample attrition and dispersal. If graduates take positions in schools that vary widely in socioeconomic and ethnic composition, in style of leadership and/or curriculum practices accounting for variance in the effectiveness of the course may become very difficult. Again, very large numbers of graduates from many colleges will be required to be able to place confidence in the research findings.

Another serious problem is the conceptual one of identifying the variables of interest and potential significance. Professor Stones (1984) insists that the true test of the effectiveness of teacher education is whether or not the pupils taught by its students learn. The problem for all teachers - whether they are practice students or veterans - is that some pupils do learn, and some do not. What is an acceptable criterion of pupil learning? If we accept a set

of scores on an examination as a criterion, teachers would be foolish not to allocate most of their teaching time preparing pupils to achieve them. This takes us close to the more fundamental and larger issue in education of specifying the criteria against which its effectiveness is to be judged.

It seems to come easily to all of us to be idealistic about what others should do, and realistic about what we can do. Not unlike us, the pronouncements of government officials concerning what teacher educators should do are idealistic, while they cite realities to explain their own performance. By outlining the demands inherent in the supervision of teaching practice I hope to have put the role in a realistic perspective. One of our difficult tasks is to help those we serve to share a realistic view of what teacher education, under the best of conditions, can achieve.

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